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ABSTRACT

The challenge of celebrating diversity in multicultural classrooms requires both teachers and students to be aware of elements influencing the communication process. This essay identifies and discusses relevant sociocultural factors that affect the interaction and learning processes among participants in diverse classrooms. As they recognize their biases, teachers and students must be cognizant of these considerations to establish a meaningful rapport in a learning and teaching environment that values and acknowledges the complex nature of diversity. In particular, the teacher's attitude, personality traits, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and awareness, along with his or her competence, contribute to the success of the communicative process. With optimistic attitudes, teachers can play a significant role as cultural mediators in classrooms. In addition, the student's motivational and attitudinal aspects, along with their multicultural readiness, have a powerful impact on maintaining and nurturing a positive educational atmosphere. By recognizing the role of sociocultural factors in educational settings, both teachers and students will contribute to a more meaningful social and cognitive exchange that is congruent with multiplying learning opportunities in the diverse classroom and consistent with new demands in today's pluralistic society. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/SLD)

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CULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS IN THE DIVERSE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The challenge of celebrating diversity in multicultural classrooms requires both teachers and students to be aware of elements influencing the communicative process. The purpose of this study is to identify and discuss relevant sociocultural factors which would affect the interaction and learning processes among participants in diverse classrooms. As they recognize their biases, teachers and students must be cognizant of these considerations to establish a meaningful rapport in a learning/teaching environment that values and acknowledges the complex nature of diversity. In particular, teacher's attitudinal factors, personality traits, enthusiasm, sensitivity and awareness, along with his/her competence contribute to the success of the communicative process. With their optimistic attitude, teachers can play a significant role as cultural mediators in the classrooms. Likewise, the student's motivational and attitudinal aspects along with their multiculturation readiness have a powerful impact on maintaining and nurturing a positive educational atmosphere. By recognizing the role of sociocultural factors in educational settings, both teachers and students will contribute to a more meaningful social and cognitive exchange that is congruent with multiplying learning opportunities in the diverse classroom, and consistent with the new interactional demands in today's pluralistic society.

CULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS IN THE DIVERSE CLASSROOM

Introduction

The challenge of celebrating diversity in multicultural classrooms requires both teachers and students to be aware of the elements influencing the communicative process. By recognizing the role of sociocultural factors in educational settings, both teachers and students will contribute to a more meaningful social and cognitive exchange that is congruent with multiplying learning opportunities in the diverse classroom, and consistent with the new interactional demands in today's pluralistic society.

Based on the framework postulated by multicultural education, the purpose of this study is to identify and discuss relevant sociocultural teacher and student factors which would affect the interaction and learning processes among participants in diverse classrooms. As they recognize their biases, teachers and students must be cognizant of these considerations to establish a meaningful rapport in a learning/teaching environment that values and acknowledges the complex nature of diversity.

Establishing Rapport

Today teachers face the challenge of diversity given the differences in culture, language, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and other factors affecting students and their interactions. The changing demographics in the U. S. society are reflected in the public schools. While educators think and function based on their monocultural training, there is a pressing need to acknowledge diversity in the classroom and that cultural differences have a profound effect on the interaction process among participants (Banks, 1994, 1995). Consequently, minority students are put at a disadvantage, because teachers' mainstream practices are not consistent with the minority students' needs (Scarcella, 1990; Swisher, 1992; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989). Nevertheless, to avoid sameness in the interactional

process, teachers in multicultural settings would be prudent to "think that the learning environment with which they are most familiar is representative of learning environments in general" (Anderson & Powell, 1988, p. 207). Although the majority of students come from the same cultural background of their teachers, there is an increasing trend toward greater diversity in the classroom; the students' diversity, however, ranges from linguistic to cognitive differences all of which impact the classroom communicative process. Once commonalties and differences are recognized are valued (Lewis & Doorlag, 1987), teachers should utilize more culturally compatible methods to meet the challenge of diversity and value students' differences (Banks, 1994, 1995; Chisholm, 1994; Grant, 1995; Suzuki, 1984). Cortes (1990) described the cultural factors that identify diverse student populations in a multicultural setting: students come to schools speaking diverse languages, bring various home values and belief systems, have different learning and communication styles, have different experiences, and live under unequal socio-economic conditions (Cortes, 1990; Irvine & York, 1995).

Although there are current approaches to communicating meaningfully with diverse student populations, present educational practices still benignly neglect the needs of these students. A comprehensive approach to the interactional process is still lacking. Since the "rules, assumptions, values, customs, practices, and procedures for appropriate classroom behavior may vary for all of these students" (Anderson & Powell, 1988, p. 207), educational practices should be revisited in terms of the cultural needs of students.

Teachers wishing to establish positive intercultural relations with diverse students and their families must become sensitized to the diversity of the people and their histories at the micro and macro levels of their cultures (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Therefore, teachers in multicultural settings should not make any assumptions about their students and their interactional patterns (Chisholm, 1994). To promote positive human relations, teachers should make every effort to understand the cultural implications of sociocultural factors that shape the communication process in educational contexts (Grant, 1995).

Multicultural Education

The role of multicultural education in schools has been debated over the years (Banks, 1994, 1995). Deeply rooted in the cultural deprivation theory, multicultural education emanates as a formula for success of diverse student population (Grant, 1995; Neito, 1996). More recent views of multicultural education go beyond empowering individuals, intercultural understanding, and better interactional processes (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Cortes, 1990), to embrace other factors that are not related to culture (Nieto, 1996). Furthermore, the current demand for multicultural education is not only for both successful and less successful diverse populations (Ogbu, 1995), but also for all learners, including mainstream students, to fulfill the promise that all participants deserve an inclusive, expansive, and comprehensive education that is multicultural (Grant, 1995; Nieto, 1996). Thus success in diverse settings should be judged in terms of all variables pertaining to students, and educators regardless of their cultural makeup. Since this encompasses what schools, students and teachers do (Ogbu, 1995; Banks, 1995), multicultural education should look into an array of variables relevant to both students and teachers in the communicative process.

The goal of multicultural education is manifold: (1) to prepare professionals for a variety of educational and applied settings; (2) to enlarge the professional knowledge base through engagement and active participation; and (3) to foster the use of the educational knowledge base in practice through public service, research and teaching activities that focus on improving practice in schools and other settings. This approach is committed to expanding educational opportunities for all students from broadly diverse social, economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. To do so, multicultural education: (1) legitimizes in the pluralistic society the history and contributions of all ethnic groups; (2) provides cooperative and effective experiences when interacting with diverse populations; and (3) develops effective mediation and interactional techniques in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity.

In particular, multicultural education affirms its responsibility to prepare teachers in order that they may assist all children, adolescents, and adults to understand the significance of cultural heritage in their personal development and interactional process (Grant, 1995; Neito, 1996). In its endeavor to ameliorate education, multicultural education assumes that (1) ethnic heritage is part of each person's endowment, (2) language exerts a powerful effect on development of attitudes and skills, and (3) culture influences identity and learning.

The multidisciplinary educational program that provides multiple learning opportunities matching the academic, sociolinguistic, and interactional needs of all students must account for various needs that vary widely due to differences in race, sex, ethnicity, or sociolinguistic backgrounds of the students and educators (Banks, 1995; Neito, 1996). In addition to enhancing the development of their basic academic skills, students should develop a convalescent understanding of their own backgrounds and of other groups that compose the larger society. It is worthwhile to discuss common factors that influence the interactional process as they relate to teachers and students in culturally diverse learning and teaching situations.

Sociocultural Factors

Learning is a two-way reciprocal activity involving teachers and students. This takes place through the process of teacher-student interaction and mediation. This process is affected by common sociocultural factors relevant to the cultural backgrounds of both students and teachers. Since these factors vary in nature and scope, emphasis will be placed on those that directly serve as ingredients for successful and meaningful communication and interaction in the classroom.

First, attitudinal variables play a significant role in the communicative process. According to Borden (1991), one's attitude is the axiom for effective intercultural communication in various settings. Positive attitudes should be cultivated both ways:

mutual perceptions of teacher and student are key determiners of effective communication. In fact, cultivating more positive cultural attitudes allows teachers and students to understand each other's attitudes, values, languages, orientations, and other forces that affect the interaction process, and the context of learning and teaching. Since attitude formation develops in the early stages of one's life and is the result of parents', peers' attitudes, students and teachers should harness the classroom environment to mutually understand these diverse interactional patterns as equally significant in the classroom context.

Second, linguistic variables are important in communication styles. Despite linguistic universals, there are divergent differences among languages brought in to the classroom by linguistically different students. Teachers must develop a crosslinguistic awareness that helps them understand areas of difficulty that face students learning a target language. Such competence will account for reasons behind communication breakdowns in the classroom, and difficulty in solving problems in learning teaching situations (Bermudez, 1986). At the same time, crosslinguistic awareness can be a tool to help students overcome linguistic barriers in multilingual settings. In addition, for diverse student populations, there are other obvious sociolinguistic differences inherent at various linguistic levels such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. This requires teachers to have a pragmatic competence that values these differences and communicates messages in the context of sociolinguistic variations.

Next, non-verbal communication plays a large role in the communicative process. The domain of non-verbal behavior is often overshadowed by verbal means of communication. Nonetheless, such non-verbal behaviors as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, proximity, . . . and other paralinguistic elements are equally important due to their covert and overt cultural connotations. These features are shaped by the culture of the individual and passed on from generation to the next. Very often, some of these behaviors seem to carry offensive overtones to others while some may have opposite connotations.

According to Borden (1991), non-verbal linguistic competence is the participant's knowledge of the codes and when they are adequately used. That is to say, one is "competent in kinesics, haptics, proxemics, etc., to the extent that you: 1) know what behaviors are appropriate for a given relationship; 2) know when someone is behaving correctly; and 3) understand the message encoded into a particular behavior" (Borden, 1991, p. 174). Suffice to say that these features are significant in the intercommunicative process, because the visible nonverbal cues function to enhance the audible verbal messages in a given discourse.

Likewise, written discourse is mandated by culturally specific logical and cultural thought patterns (Purves, 1988). Since participants rely on their cultural schemata to process and decode the meanings embedded in the text when reading and writing, crosslinguistic competence promotes an understanding of various rhetorical strategies to facilitate the communication of intended meanings. Having this in mind, texts must be read and composed as they relate to the cultural expectations of the linguistic community in question.

Another important factor is the context of the communicative event. Participants communicate in terms of the what, when, how, why, where, and when to say what they say in terms of sociocultural norms. Meeting these demands sets the arena for successful communication and furnishes the necessary shared knowledge in which successful communicative actions take place (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). When cultures and languages meet, this may place a burden on participants who become more conscious in an attempt to maintain a balance between the cognitive and sociocultural exchange of information. Hall (1989) spoke of the sociocultural tightness and distinguished between high- and low-context cultures. As far as successful communication is concerned, participants should assess and revisit their communication strategies to expand their interpersonal and intrercultural competence. This requires them to direct and re-direct their energies to meet the socicultural demands of the context of communication.

Teachers must be sensitive to the linguistic needs of their students to facilitate the adjustment process. Apart from the surface aspects of different languages in the classroom, sociolinguistic differences may affect the communication process. Teachers and students usually transfer the learned linguistic patterns in the way they communicate with others. In many instances there is a linguistic mismatch that results in miscommunication. Embedded in the linguistic behavior are various issues pertaining to cultural issues that may be appropriate in one culture while inadequate in another.

Finally, the role of values, beliefs, and social norms cannot be elided in the communicative process. Participants must show respect and become empathetic to these social variables when they interact with one another. They must be cautioned against making any hasty judgments that may lead to prejudice and stereotypes. All values, beliefs, and social norms are equally important in meeting the human needs of their members. A more meaningful communication will take place when these are valued in culturally diverse settings.

To bridge the gap of cultural differences and value the participants' sociocultural experiences that affect the communicative process, a number of implications within the multicultural framework can be helpful in facilitating cultural mediation and effective intercultural communication. Participants in diverse educational settings are encouraged to:

1. help decenter themselves and increase multicultural awareness as they become more conscious of other diverse members thus seeing themselves coexisting harmoniously in the social unit;

2. continue to interact with diverse groups in different settings and make the process of intercultural communication a continual and long-term process;

3. explore different ways of interaction with the environment and people from different backgrounds while maintaining their ethnic identity and instilling pride in their multicultural heritage;

4. deal with the social and historical realities of the larger society gain a better

understanding of the causes of cultural conflicts and inequity and explore ways in which these social problems might be eliminated;

5. recognize that mutual care, understanding, concern, and sensitivity towards one another, in the final analysis, can be among the most important influences on meaningful communication.

Conclusion

Given the rapidly increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the classrooms, more effective interactional skills are needed by both teachers and students. Teachers can contribute to the adequacy of the communicative process through their understanding of sociocultural factors affecting the learning/teaching situations and the culture of the classroom.

This paper has attempted to shed light on some significant socicultural aspects of the communicative process in multicultural settings. This will hopefully assist teachers to have a point of departure from which to understand their students and their backgrounds. By being sensitive to the relevant socicultural variables in the communicative event, teachers can better determine how to maintain a meaningful rapport, and structure the learning activities that are relevant to the social and educational needs of all students. Similarly, the multicultural competence will maximize learning opportunities, and help cultivate more positive cultural attitudes among participants in diverse settings.

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